



## Discussions and interventions

# Pluriversalism and the Ecological Regime of Accumulation

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Jason W. Moore is a fierce polemicist and his indictment of the decolonial project associated with the Latin American “Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality” collective confirms his verve. His commentary on pluriversalism cannot be more straightforward. It thus deserves close reading: decolonial thinking has constructed an abstract “metaphysics of coloniality” that misses the concrete origins of the modern world-system; its romantic cult of indigenous struggles lacks the internationalism of radical emancipatory politics; “pluriversalism and its cognates” are incompatible with a history of capitalism centred on the material process of accumulation, class formation, and the plundering of nature; decolonial “linguistic acrobatics” promises war against Western knowledge, but in reality it reifies Europe and reproduces bourgeois ahistorical universalism.

Let me continue to highlight Moore's arguments: world-system analysis sees history as “patterned”, made of “world-historical turning points” and transitions in the wicked saga of capitalist accumulation, decolonial thought embraces an anti-communist agenda ingrained in the ideological narrative of the clash of civilizations: the “West and the Rest”, Eurocentrism or “indigenist and other ethnonational identities”. Decoloniality is not radical politics but a bourgeois paradigm, political ontology. It dissolves history, capital, and classes into assemblages, conjunctures, and re-worldings. Eurocentric and liberal thinkers such as Bruno Latour and Dipesh Chakrabarty join with the decolonial collective in the Anthropocene Consensus, a class-denialist and anti-dialectical caricature of historical materialism. In short, Marxist political ecologies have little to gain from pluriversal thinkers, the narrative of capitalist expansion and the struggles by the Proletariat/Femitiariat/Biotariat must be distinguished from bourgeois “ruling ideas”.

For those familiar with the alchemical transformation of Marxist concepts during decolonial struggles – Frantz Fanon, Subaltern Studies, and the Zapatistas are prominent examples – Moore's harsh condemnation of pluriversal themes will sound an alarm bell. His method of “dialectical universalism” seems to reject decolonial “border thinking”, the production of knowledge “from non-Western categories of thought through Western categories of thought” (Mignolo 2021: 330). Are we witnessing the exhaustion of an emancipatory conjuncture? Don't we need instead to

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cultivate strategic convergences of heterogeneous anti-capitalist ideas? Readers might have noticed Moore's reference to an essay that was seminal for both world-system analysis and decolonial thought, co-authored in 1992 by the founding figures of these intellectual traditions: Immanuel Wallerstein and Aníbal Quijano (Quijano & Wallerstein 1992). The articulation of Marxist and decolonial views from North and South America contained in this text has forged an enduring epistemic alliance and reinforced a paradigm shift: if the origin of the modern world-system is located in the colonization of the Americas and in the “long sixteenth century”; if the history of capitalism can be rewritten through the concept of coloniality; if labour distribution and ethnicity, capital and power relations have been woven together in a world-economy three centuries before the Industrial Revolution in England, then the ruling ideas of the Western social sciences can be uprooted from the European soil and planted in the historical geography of “New World” genocide, slavery, and racism. Both Moore's world-ecology and Walter Mignolo's geopolitics of knowledge presuppose the Quijano-Wallerstein articulation of coloniality and modernity, the coalescence of a narrative of capitalist accumulation and colonial power formations.

So, I do not follow Moore's rejection of pluriversal decolonialism, and I suggest that we cultivate a common horizon against the “violent synthesis of social formation and earth formation” attempted by neoliberal capitalism. As recalled by Wallerstein in a 1981 interview – world-system analysis emerged from “the birth of the Third World as a political problem, the Bandung Conference, and decolonization” (Wallerstein, Stame & Meldolesi 2019). By continuing to probe Marxist categories – I quote again from the interview with Wallerstein – we can approach “the moment of a definitive political rupture in the single Marxism (as reflected in a single world Marxist movement) and the birth of a thousand Marxisms”.

Moore's penetrating critique of the Anthropocene Consensus can help pluriversal thinkers recognize the civilizational/colonial matrix of this “relentlessly polysemic concept well-integrated into the neoliberal eco-industrial complex” (Moore, this issue). The Anthropocene is a crucial epistemic device of green capitalism. It re-articulates the “double internality” of historical nature and financial capital by absorbing markets into natural history. In the Great Planetary Inside of the Anthropocene, the neoliberal plundering and management of nature recognizes itself as a world-ecology of geohistorical proportions. The fragmentary practices of the subsumption of climate and the environment into capital are glued by a suasive arrangement of thoughts and affects, an imaginary condition reflecting empirical reality in a distorting mirror. Through the Anthropocene Consensus, neoliberalism becomes a pervasive ecological state of society, a true state of nature – as it happened with Rousseau's “savage” individualism, which inspired the US Constitution and liberal Western subjectivities.

For the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the Anthropocene is a “unifying lens” that frames the planet as a theatre of resilience and adaptation (IPCC 2018: 32). The Earth is apprehended as a crime scene of mass ecological extinctions; heterogeneous natures constituted by forensic reason are monitored by a suspicious *Anthropos*. A theory could not accommodate incoherent desires and heterogeneous disciplines. But since the Anthropocene is a way of thinking – “Anthropocene thinking”, as claimed by the United Nations Human Development Report (UNDP 2020: 22) – then it can channel eco-political preoccupations and shape them as an all-encompassing atmosphere: everything, from food and religion to sex and military strategy, is perceived as taking place in the homogeneous geohistorical milieu of the Anthropocene.

Neoliberalism is at the same time a planetary ecology, an economic theory, and a governing rationality. Its underlying claim is that it can reveal the secret design of nature, which according to Friedrich Hayek is a *kosmos*, the biological and social equilibrium that emerges spontaneously from complexity (Hayek 2012: 38). Nature and the economy are two sides of the same coin, a fascinating “spontaneous macro-order” that only an evolutionary approach can apprehend in its global configuration (Hayek 1990: 131).

The need to address climate change has accelerated the neoliberal management of the atmosphere – the ultimate commodity frontier – and intensified the efforts to integrate financial and human capital into the two-headed monster of “natural capital”. An abundant literature in political ecology and critical geography, social anthropology and environmental social theory has reconstructed the perverse translation of climate, biodiversity, water, fisheries, seeds, plants and renewable resources into natural capital. Through enclosures, global environmental regulations and ecosystem services, neoliberalism has inserted capital in the past, present and future of the land, sea, and air. Markets are apprehended as ecosystems exposed to evolutionary forces of natural selection and competition; adaptation and survival are the guiding principles of policymakers and corporations; resilience characterizes both natural capital and social systems; hundreds of structural adjustment programs imposed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to defeat collectivism in the global South have destabilized socio-ecological relations and the ensuing crises have been naturalized as turbulences in the far-from-equilibrium states of the planet (Walker & Cooper 2011).

The neoliberal state of nature is the theater of operations of the present world-historical phase transition of capitalism into an ecological regime of accumulation. Instead of a univocal value theory, neoliberal capital relies on a bricolage of methods, supported by a plethora of valuation tools and scenario planning frameworks. A monistic theory of value would not allow capitalism to pursue its uneven practices of appropriation and capitalization. On the contrary, a flexible political ontology – such as Hayek’s evolutionary philosophy grounded on the performative production of socially natural order through “shaping rules” (Hong 2002) – serves this purpose effectively. Neoliberalism’s ontology of nature legitimizes the energy transition and facilitates the structural transformation of biopower into geopower (Luisetti 2019). Without the Great Inside of Anthropocene Thinking, heterogeneous socio-natures could not be flattened, and ecocides recast as a “CO<sub>2</sub> -equivalent” issues of energy-costs and ecosystems’ depletion (Dehm 2018).

Natural capital embraces irenically a plurality of valuation techniques, overcoming Hayek’s excommunication of ecological economics and the accounting of value through interchangeable units of abstract energy (Hayek 1979). Once all externalities have been internalized in the ecological state of nature, biophysical theories of value and socio-metabolic flows can work side by side with mainstream economics and evolutionary approaches.

The ecosystem services mapped by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA 2005) endow natural capital with properties that suit both economic valuation and ecological sensibilities. The inclusion of human-made capital into the “supporting services” of natural capital is the final transubstantiation of capital into cosmic nature. Modularity characterizes the energy transition: the MEDEAS-World model of integrated assessment sets the landscape for Europe’s energy future, combining monetary and biophysical data, aggregating heterogeneous physical parameters such as energy available to society, economic indicators, and environmental impacts (MEDEAS 2021).

The neoliberal ecologization of capital is the final metamorphosis of the colonial enclosure of life and matter carried out by the thermodynamic idea of work as energy.<sup>1</sup> Since energy is ubiquitous, and “the essential property of energy (the ability to do work) cannot be substituted”, natures can be expressed as services – their specific “ability to do work” – containing a specific energy-content (Costanza 2004: 343). Even if not yet fully operationalized by econometric tools, a “general biophysical theory of value” (Costanza 2004: 344) accompanies the reduction of capital to evolutionary processes of self-organization and dissipation. Through the regulative idea of “available energy”, food, raw materials, labor, and energy sources link up with energy costs, and can be modelled by the monetary system.

The Four Cheaps – food, labor, energy, and raw materials – at the core of Moore’s history of capitalism are now correlated through a system of abstractions and substitutions. Despite the rising costs of commodities and the disruption of planetary life, the current world-ecology does not appear to neoliberalism as the ultimate contradiction of capitalism but as an exciting quantum leap into a non-anthropocentric regime of valuation: “If ecosystem services were actually paid for, in terms of their value contribution to the global economy, the global price system would be very different from what it is today.” (Costanza, Golubiewski & Cleveland 2007: 259) The ecological regime of accumulation is a “passive revolution”, a top-down reorganization of socio-economic systems in new forms consonant with existing property relations. Since the “ability to do work is related to the degree of organization or order of a thing relative to its environment” (Costanza 2004: 343), energy can be mobilized everywhere: biophysical gradients offer precious energy sources also in melting glaciers and decomposing waste, ocean winds and animal heat; one can squeeze hydrogen from the air and the movement of tectonic plates. The all-encompassing commodity frontier of the neoliberal state of nature is the thermodynamic harvesting of the planet.

It is worth recalling Moore’s opening statements: “The unfolding planetary crisis – which is also an epochal crisis of the capitalist world-ecology – cries out for ‘pluriversal’ imaginations of every kind. But what kind of pluriversalism, set against what kind of universalism, and for what kind of politics?” (Moore, this issue) I share Moore’s interrogative urgency: *what kind of pluriversalism, and for what kind of politics?* Radical decolonialism expects that we get rid of the European fetishization of “the political” and qualify pluriversal imagination as a situated geopolitics of knowledge. It resonates with materialist political ecologies that circumvent the deadlock between “Planetary Proletariat” and “life territories”. The neoliberal subsumption of “plural, vernacular ‘little-e’ energies” and human labour (Lohmann 2015) takes place everywhere, from hydroelectric mega-basins in the Swiss Alps to lithium mines in the Atacama salt flats of Chile. Opposing this world-ecology demands antagonistic epistemic communities, reconstitutions of perception and thought that break with the political ontology of the neoliberal state of nature: “What kind of work do we want? What kind of nature and science do we want? Who has already taken this approach and how can we learn from and join with them? ... In indigenous Latin America ... a planner’s project to extract oil to meet energy needs will often be seen as interfering with, diminishing or blocking other ‘energies’ associated with the earth” (Lohmann 2015: 5).

The cross-fertilization of materialist and decolonial concepts is not over yet. A pluriversal politics of nature can reverse the ecocidal imagination of the capitalist energy transition. It can promote alliances between liberation ecologies in urban centres and agricultural lands, indigenous territories and Western enclosures (RTM 2022). So, where is the “real movement” of world-history to be found? We can detect its creeping crawl

in distributional conflicts, in the struggles to preserve and promote incommensurable values and practices of energy, life, and justice across extra-human natures (Martinez-Alier 2010)<sup>2</sup>. The flight from the neoliberal state of nature is not a flight from history and a retreat into abstract particularisms (Latourian Earthlings and parliaments of things are not welcomed). To quote Wallerstein, it is a farewell to “European universalism”, the birth of a “multiplicity of universalisms” (Wallerstein 2006: 84). The neoliberal regime of accumulation shuns biophysical limits. It can be defeated only by the pluriversal universalisms of liberation movements and insurgent earth-beings (de la Cadena 2015).

## Endnotes

1. On the capitalist/colonial co-production of work and energy in the nineteenth century, see Larry Lohmann (2021: 87–91). Lohmann's thermodynamic interpretation of the capitalist world-ecology integrates Moore's historical topology of commodity frontiers (Moore 2000).
2. See the EJAtlas 2022 for 3610 concrete cases: <https://ejatlas.org/>

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